

Joshua 3

Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. ²At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³and commanded the people, ‘When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, ⁴so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come any nearer to it.’ ⁵Then Joshua said to the people, ‘Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.’ ⁶To the priests Joshua said, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass on in front of the people.’ So they took up the ark of the covenant and went in front of the people.

⁷The Lord said to Joshua, ‘This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, “When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.”’ ⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, ‘Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God.’ ¹⁰Joshua said, ‘By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.’

¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing towards the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea,^{*} were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

The last number of times in the pulpit I have been trying to preach sermons that are broader than just the particular passage of scripture that is read in church. Biblical stories themselves exist within a larger story, and that larger story exists within yet a larger one, etc. Last week, for example, we heard of the story of the death of Moses. Yet that story existed within the larger Mosaic narrative. And that story existed within the larger narrative of the patriarchs and the call of Abraham and Sarah. And that story exists within the largest story of all: God's ultimate purpose: the healing of creation. The reason for preaching broader sermons is that sometimes, in the particulars of a sub-plot, the larger narrative and context is lost. And when we lose the larger narrative and context, then we lose the whole point of the biblical witness. Vision becomes only what is directly in front of us rather than the horizon that is calling us, and it is that horizon that is the purpose of the movement of our feet, the end toward which we are walking. Take, for example, this morning's passage from the book of Joshua. This passage is one of the major transitions in the entire bible. It marks the shift from preparation to profession, from seeking to finding, from catechumenate to discipleship. This story is much larger than simply crossing the Jordan.

Biblically, we have just left the Torah, the first five books of the bible. In the Torah God reveals the divine intention for the salvation of all humanity. In the call of Abraham and Sarah God promises that through them all the nations of the world will bless themselves; not some of them, ALL of them. It is in the story of the Torah that the work of preparation happens: the formation of a nation in the age of the patriarchs, the protection of the nation in Egypt in a time of drought, the identity formation of the nation in the exodus and wandering, and the expected behavior of the nation revealed in the promulgation of the Law that would guide the people's relationships with each other, and with all others. This is the story of God's intention to bring salvation to the entire world.

But a major shift happens at the end of Deuteronomy and the start of Joshua. The time of formation is over; the time for the Chosen People to participate in the will of God is now begun; the time for the people to own the destiny that is theirs as a Chosen People is upon them. It is time for the people to cross into the Promised Land and in that crossing, through their own purposeful work, become the people through whom all the nations of the earth will bless themselves. This is the purpose of the larger story. The Promised Land is not a place to live happily ever after; it is rather a place from which their work will be accomplished.

You see, when the Law was promulgated at Sinai, it truly set Israel apart from all the other nations. The laws were different; the expectations of relationship were different; the ways they organized and lived were different. Through their living and interacting they were an alternative way of being in the world. The whole purpose from the beginning was to make them different, and in that differentness to be a witness to the larger love of God, to be a light for the larger purpose of God. To use biblical images, the ultimate purpose is what is summed up on the only verse of scripture that is permanently posted in this sanctuary; it is what is written on the bottom of the statue of Isaiah given to us by Temple Sinai: all the nations will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. THAT is the point of the calling, and equipping, of the people Israel.

Not to get too dramatic here, but THAT is the point of the calling, and equipping, of the people of First Plymouth Congregational Church. My sisters and brothers in Christ, this is why we exist. This is who we are. God has called us here, and we WERE called here, to continue the work begun at the call of Abraham and Sarah, continued in the story of the patriarchs and Moses, continued in the saga of the people Israel, continued in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, continued in the formation of the Church, continued to this day in us. Our call exists in the larger story of salvation history; we are part of the work of healing creation.

Today our own congregation is doing its own form of crossing into a new place. Since Dr. Haskins' retirement in 1993, our story has been a bit tumultuous. When I arrived here three years ago, if we include interim ministers, I was the eighth Senior Minister in twelve years. The tumult, which had been just a small part of our larger story, was dangerously close to becoming our defining narrative. But we did not let that happen. Instead, in the intentional process of Appreciative Inquiry, we "re-membered". We re-membered as we told the truly defining stories of who we are as a people of God. We re-membered when we identified those ways in which we are actively participating in the larger narrative of God. We noted that that active participation is most visible when we create a sense of community through individual participation and involvement; when we unconditionally accept, care for and support our members; when we reach out to people outside our church community; when we foster intellectual, personal and spiritual growth; when we provide a forum to express and embrace our faith; when we seek and share diversity; when we involve and nurture families, children and youth; when we rejoice in our rich traditions and history and explore new boundaries. We re-membered, and in that re-membering we, like Israel, did our own preparation to cross into the Promised Land and to enter it again for the first time.

Verses three and four of our scripture lesson this morning are very curious. The scripture says, " 'When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.' What an odd thing to say to wanderers! They are nomads; they constantly go to, and they have learned the skill sets to survive in, places they have never been. And yet they are told to follow the ark so that they may know the way they should go, for they have not passed that way before. This is curious.

Or perhaps not so curious. Because now they are not wandering; they are moving with direction. Remember what we said earlier, "The time of formation is over; the time for the Chosen People to participate in the will of God is now begun; the time for the people to own the destiny that is theirs as a Chosen People is upon them. It is time for them to cross into the Promised Land and in that crossing, through their own purposeful work, to become the people through whom all the nations of the earth will bless themselves." The skill set they needed to do this was not physical survival. The skill set they needed to do this was discipleship—that is what they were learning in their wandering: how to BE the people through whom all the nations of the world would bless themselves. That is why they needed to keep the ark before them as stood on the verge of Jordan. The ark: that which contained the Ten Commandments; that which contained the physical symbol of the relationships they were to have with each other and the world and with God. It is God's love—God's intention of healing the nations—that they hold before them as they enter the new land. That is the way they have not passed before. This

passage marks the shift from preparation to profession, from seeking to finding, from catechumenate to discipleship.

We, as a called congregation, as we leave behind a temporary tumultuous time of wandering, are crossing to that new land again for the first time. "Again," because we have been there before; this congregation's long history of witness and discipleship is impressive. "For the first time," because every generation, EVERY generation, must reorient its ministry to the contextual realities it uniquely faces. As a church we are shaped by our context even as the gospel reshapes that context through us. Such a calling never leaves us in a finished, settled, or permanent incarnation.¹ It leaves us crossing into the Promised Land again and again and again.

I know it is easy to say to me here, "Hey, Preacher, we're just one church; don't make too big a deal out of what we are doing." With all due respect, I disagree. What we are about is the same calling as Israel received in biblical times; the witness is now ours. We do that by being the people we are called and shaped to be. As a church we are a sent people, witnessing to an alternative way of being in the world—a healing Way, a loving Way, a forgiving Way. The whole purpose of the call to Abraham and Sarah is now ours: to witness to the larger love of God, to be a light for the larger purpose of God, to stand as a beacon for the healing of creation.

Many theologians are noting that every 500 years or so the church goes through a massive shift. It is as if the church cracks open and discards what is superfluous and reclaims the essentials of what it means to be a called and sent community. It happened when the church became the state religion in the west under Constantine; it happened during the reformation; it is happening now. We are living at a time of one of the biggest upheavals in church history. Ours is not an easy time. What a blessing! Playwright Christopher Fry put it this way:

The [church] can go to the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is not winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul people ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is the exploration into God.¹

The Reverend George Anastos

¹ *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Darrell L. Guder, editor.

¹ Quoted in, Diogenes Allen, "The Fields Are White for Harvest" in Arnold Lovell, ed., *Evangelism in the Reformed Tradition* (Decatur, GA: CTS Press), 17-18